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Too much togetherness

Anonymous

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ABSTRACT: As the popularity of office space designed to accommodate group work has increased, attention to the needs of the individual has decreased. A work environment that enables concentration for individual tasks is often of secondary consideration. Individuals must have time and an appropriate place to think about the new information and ideas they discuss in their interactions with co-workers. Evaluating how well workers can concentrate in their environment involves determining their natural screening tendencies. Bothering stimuli might include the obvious as well as subtle ergonomic distractions. Workers are likely having difficulty thinking effectively if they seem bothered by minor occurrences. Employees troubled by external stimuli are usually restless and wear serious expressions; seem overly tired, angry or withdrawn; are frequently absent; might overeat; or goof off. Asking employees about both physical and sensory elements in their work environment is the first step in successfully designing or improving a workspace.

TEXT: Team projects, team goals, team meetings. Working together as a means to foster creativity and increase productivity is a concept that permeates most aspects of the modern office. But if interaction is the defining force behind the design of your office's workspace, your team players may inwardly be shouting, "Enough already!"

Facilities managers and design consultants warn that as the popularity of office space designed to accommodate group work has increased, attention to the needs of the individual has decreased. As design trends have evolved to facilitate today's teamwork business approach, a work environment that enables concentration for individual tasks is often of secondary consideration.

However, experts agree that teamwork and individual work are equally important factors in the productivity equation. In today's global marketplace, where productivity is the key to staying ahead of the competition, companies must ensure that their office designs maximize the performance of both teams and individuals.

Where to go after the team huddle

When a company focuses on teamwork, the concept often becomes regarded as the only way to get the job done. "Just putting people together in an interactive setting is not enough," says Doug Aldrich, vice chairman of the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) and global manager, laboratory facilities, for Dow Chemical Corporation. "After working with the team, an individual might need to conduct a study or write a report—a task that requires concentration."

Individuals must have time and an appropriate place to think about the new information and ideas they discuss in their interactions with co-workers, says Phyl Smith, a consultant and designer who founded Working Spaces, a design firm that focuses on enhancing worker performance. "Productivity, commonly judged as performance, begins with thinking. Thinking plus acting equals performance. Anything that gets in the way of thinking, gets in the way of performance," Smith says.

"The creative process necessitates both teamwork and individual steps. Companies usually do a good job of providing space for the group, but ignore the individual's need for a setting conducive to concentration. In

this way, management shortcuts efforts to increase productivity," she says. "Because thinking is internal and invisible, analyzing how effectively workers can concentrate is often ignored."

Screeners vs. non-screeners

Evaluating how well workers can concentrate in their environment involves determining their natural screening tendencies. Research on screening behavior shows that people have different abilities to screen out distractions. Determining if a worker is a screener or non-screener is the most important variable in maximizing performance, says Smith. "Screener-type thinkers can readily block out non-work-related stimuli. Non-screener types find their attention easily redirected from their work. These employees need protection from extraneous, distracting stimuli. Where the workspace is located and how people are positioned in it, relative to their screening behaviors, can be critical factors in maximizing their performance," she says.

It is important to note that bothersome stimuli might include the obvious, such as proximity of co-workers and related noise, as well as subtle ergonomic distractions. Repetitive, unnatural movements, ill-fitting furniture and insufficient equipment, storage or layout space are also examples of stimuli that interrupt the thought processes. "The two most common hindrances to concentration that workers mention to me are noise and lack of layout space," says Smith.

The distractions can cost you. Managers may want to address problems relating to concentration simply to make employees happier and more comfortable. There are also financial reasons for concern.

The company pays a price for physical interferences, such as an uncomfortable chair that causes back strain, for example. Worker concentration is interrupted and productivity is reduced by slower performance. Absenteeism, rising healthcare costs, increased liability costs, drained employer resources and declining organizational profits are further ramifications of physical interferences, notes Smith.

However, the results of problems with our internal, or thinking, performance, are not as easy to recognize. When our sensory as well as physical environment impedes our thought processes, what is the price? Smith addresses this question in her book, *Creating Workplaces Where People Can Think*:

"At a minimum average of 30 minutes lost performance time per day per employee, 22 days per month, total lost time equals six percent of total available working time. Multiplied by an average \$40,000 annual salary plus benefits, multiplied by x number of employees...how much money is wasted per year due to non-supportive work environments?" Smith asks.

Smith says that when she asks workers how much time they spend dealing with "what gets in their way" as they work, answers vary from 15 minutes to more than two hours a day. "Many people can show that they lose more than 30 minutes of good performance time on an average day," says Smith. "Companies should consider how much money is going down the drain."

Is anybody home up there?

With the thought that poor office design may be costing your company big bucks, you're probably ready to take a closer look at your workers' daily habits. How does a manager know if the occupants of an ultra-cool office, with its open aisles and multiple workstations, really are concentrating to their maximum potential? With minimal effort, managers should be able to easily detect the signs of concentration problems.

Workers are likely having difficulty thinking effectively if they seem bothered by minor occurrences: the hum of the copy machine, an activity held elsewhere in the building or a buzzing light fixture. Employees

troubled by external stimuli are usually restless and wear serious expressions, seem overly tired, angry or withdrawn, are frequently absent, might overeat or "goof off."

"Managers must be observant-wander around the office, drop in on workers and make yourself available on a frequent, casual basis, and you will gain a lot of helpful information," says Aldrich. "If you keep your eyes and ears open, you will get all the feedback you need to learn who is having environment-related problems."

Designing for maximum productivity Asking employees about both physical and sensory elements in their work environment is the first step in successfully designing or improving a workspace, according to Smith. "All employees should be given the opportunity to participate in the planning phase of office design," she says.

"Managers can start by asking workers about the physical elements in their workspace, such as storage shelves, furnishings and equipment, and then move on to sensory elements. Lighting, noise, temperature, even odors, are factors that need to be included in the environmental analysis," Smith says. "Serious consideration should be given to what employees say gets in their way."

The information gleaned from employee input can direct efforts to best plan office space to maximize productivity levels. It is important to note that there is no single correct design, however, the most popular office layouts offer flexibility.

"Today many companies provide different workspace options," says Aldrich. "A design might include drop-in offices, conference rooms and project rooms-all equipped with phones, computers or whatever equipment the employees need. Individual tasks could be handled in the drop-in offices, while teams can use the project rooms for long-term jobs."

Designers should utilize and manage the workplace's given areas of higher and lower stimuli, says Smith. "Areas of higher stimuli, such as passageways, equipment areas and windows with busy views, can be used for workers with good screening abilities or by teams. Inside corner spaces, or those with interior walls and quiet views, can accommodate non-screener types," she says.

So happy together...and individually

Conventional wisdom therefore dictates that both individuals and teams should have access to work areas that vary in size and stimuli protection to meet different concentration needs. Company management must consider the need for a balance of spaces to work in and realize that no single design can be all things to all workers.

Armed with our experts' tips, perhaps your facility manager can come up with new ideas for maximizing concentration and productivity in your office, if he can just find a place to think...

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